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ABSTRACT

Based on the personal experiences and observations of a person who has worked in the field of high school, collegiate, and professional journalism, this paper discusses the professional press as a preface to examining scholastic publications. The comments on the professional press are: financial stability is necessary for a newspaper to enjoy its fullest freedom, the role of the publisher is changing as chain-ownership continues to grow, the content of newspapers is different because of Watergate and reader interest surveys, and ethics has become a growing concern among newspapers. Eight conclusions are drawn concerning the scholastic press: high school editors are mainly leaders and sometimes journalists, editors and journalism students in college are better users of the English language than English majors, the decline in the frequency of publication of scholastic newspapers should lead to a greater use of the news magazine style of writing, student newspapers are using legal devices to obtain more freedom in reporting and publishing, students should be involved in making decisions about their own publications, students are now concerned about more serious issues than in the past, the riddle of who is the publisher of school papers has not been solved, and a sense of humor and of understanding is important for those working with students. (Author/TJ)

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A LOOK AT THE SCHOLASTIC PRESS

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There is a story that a researcher found that the rate of growth of Baptists in the United States was greater than the rate of growth of the population. He then concluded that at some future time there would be more Baptists than people in the United States.

These remarks will not be based on a research study. Rather, they are the observations of a former high school journalism teacher and publications adviser who continued a similar role in three state universities. I am now in my thirteenth year as manager of a state press association of daily and weekly newspapers. Sandwiched into these years were positions as a public school administrator and as a newspaper editor.

There is a place for quantitative research on newspapers. I recall the feature story by a reporter in Charleston, South Carolina, a very old city. The writer counted the graves in the city cemeteries, compared this number with the population of the city, and came up with the conclusion that his neighbors were indeed living in a community more dead than alive.

I hope that I will not be guilty of glamorizing the past. As a Marine, I often heard the remark, "The Old Corps is not what it used to be, and it never was." It is easy to look backwards, omitting the bad and seeing only the good. This is neither good journalism nor good history.

Scholastic journalism generally takes as a model the principles and practices of the professional press. These are some conclusions I have after more than thirteen years of close observation of daily and weekly newspapers.

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First, a newspaper has to be financially independent to be really free. A publication that is just staying ahead of bankruptcy is more susceptible to pressure than a financially sound one. You have heard the saying that the freedom of the press belongs to the person who owns a press. An editor was once asked the characteristic he most liked in a publisher. The answer was "solvency."

Newspapers are making money. It is hard to start a new one in competition with an established newspaper. Some county seat weekly newspapers in my state are now selling for a million or more dollars. You can't call them "poor weekly newspapers" any more. Most of the new ventures in my state have failed because of the inability to survive financially.

Second, the nature of the publisher is changing. The independent one-paper owner is disappearing. The number of newspapers has declined nationally. Large cities have fewer newspaper voices. Chain ownership is increasing. A recent television program reported that 97 per cent of newspapers have no competition, and 72 per cent of readers get a chain-produced product. A prominent West Coast publisher said that there will be no independent newspapers in twenty years. He didn't like the prospect.

What these publishers do with their power varies. On the one hand you have a Panax publisher who fires an editor for refusing to publish two bad stories. On the other you have a great man like the late Nelson Poynter of the two St. Petersburg (Fla.) newspapers. At his death he left his papers with instructions that they were not to be sold to chain owners and that they were not themselves to become the nucleus for a chain. Among the standards he left as a legacy to his great publications was the one that above-average staffers were to be hired at above-average salaries.

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If the threat from great empires of the press becomes too great, there is always the specter of government intervention. This could be speeded up by the growing skepticism of a public which sees the suppression of news as it happened in crime reporting in Phoenix after the murder of a courageous reporter like Bolles.

Third, newspaper content is changing in response to research on reader interest. The old society pages in many instances are being changed to "life style" and "trends" pages. The importance of consumer stories was revealed by a survey, and this has resulted in assignments by editors to this subject as a beat. Investigative stories got a tremendous boost from the Watergate experience. This has been reflected in a new national organization, Investigative Reporters and Editors, Inc. (IRE).

Our campus newspapers are following this trend. Student activities funds are being searched for abuses. Entrance to faculty meetings at a state university was obtained by a court order. IRE states in its literature that "...all good reporters do investigative work, whether assigned to government, science, education, finance or any other traditional beat..."

Ed Newman has made us more conscious of good writing. Editors are combing their copy to eliminate cliches and bad grammar. I especially like the story I read recently of a compilation of language used in the Maryland legislature. In a heated debate one senator said to another, "Senator, I am going to answer that in two words. And those two words are Im Possible." And then there was the time one legislator said to another, "Let's not beat a dead horse to death."

Journalism schools, editors and writers all say we should write clearly and correctly. However, I remember a letter I received from an editor who said that students couldn't spell, and the editor made a spelling error himself. My

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observation is that there hasn't been much improvement in grammar or spelling over the years. The old folks, who couldn't write or spell, are still chastising the young folks for their shortcomings.

A final characteristic in the professional press is a growing concern for ethics. In the old days reporters enjoyed free railroad transportation, booze and other goodies from just about every lobby to whom the press was important. This has been replaced in many instances by a growing concern for "ethics," especially by the so-called "working press." The Society for Professional Journalists/Sigma Delta Chi has come out against "freebies." My own state press association, goaded by a young reporter, no longer accepts cocktail parties at its conventions from its non-newspaper members. Some of the daily newspapers in my state pay reviewers' admissions to plays and sports writers' plane costs to out-of-state sports events they cover. This is not common practice, perhaps, but it is a growing trend.

What are the scholastic journalists up to in this time of change in the media? Here are some general observations.

First, student editors are primarily leaders in high school. They are more leaders than journalists. I once kept some records on what happened to editors after high school. The majority of them did not study journalism in college. They were as a group far better students than student body presidents. My conclusion was that editors were ambitious youngsters who were seeking places of leadership, and they found it on the school paper. Quite a few became journalists. Almost all were leaders.

Second, high school and college journalists can spell and write better than English majors. This is not hard to understand. They use the language more. I confirmed this once by checking the test scores of journalism majors and college

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newspaper editors against the scores of English majors at a school where I taught. The journalism students and editors as a group consistently scored higher on mechanics and effectiveness of expression than did the English majors. The latter apparently read a lot but do not write very much.

Third, there has been a decline over the years in the frequency of publication of high school newspapers. I once advised one of two weekly high school newspapers in South Carolina. Now there are no weeklies. Hopefully this situation will result in an increase in news magazines in high schools. It is foolish to write a news story about an event that happened the month before, especially if it is written as if it were fresh news. This is a place where good high school writers are already following the lead of the professional press in writing in-depth or explanatory copy. It is harder to do, but it is better journalism.

I still recall an especially good story written about smoking in high school in Florida. A survey was conducted, interviews were held, and the reader was given a detailed insight into who smoked, why they smoked, and how they felt about it. The story explored the environment of smoking students at home and in school. It takes good advisers and journalism teachers to get this kind of writing.

Fourth, students are more conscious about their legal rights than formerly, and they are exercising them. The supreme courts are finding that "the constitution doesn't stop at the school house door." Student newspapers often meet resistance from administrators. School principals, and I have been one, are extremely sensitive to criticism, especially from students. There is a growing body of law which does give to students in high school and college the first amendment rights to which all citizens are entitled.

Openness in school boards of publications, for example, can work. In my ten years as secretary of the Board of Student Publications at Florida State University

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we never went into a single executive session. We discussed personnel matters, elected editors, received legal advice from lawyers, and did other things some Freedom of Information laws exempt from openness. We survived, albeit sometimes uncomfortably.

Fifth, the lines of responsibility are more clearly defined on campus than before. Authoritarian administrators are being forced by legal means or by pressure from the press to set up some kind of student participation in decisions. This is especially true on college campuses. The best systems have representatives from the student body, the faculty and the administration. I remember working with student publications where the board of publications had five student and four faculty members. I was told by some that this wouldn't work, as the faculty would always be outvoted by the students. It didn't work that way. All the good judgments are not lodged in the minds of the faculty and administration. Students are not always irresponsible. There is a move in some professional newspapers towards "participatory management." This means getting imput from all levels of employees and management. Where it is handled properly, this means better results. This principle applies to school publications, too.

Sixth, the issues that the student press deals with now are more important ones than those of the "good old days." The time of problems with "gossip columns" has been replaced hopefully with problems of how far editors can go in fact-finding and opinion-expressing on more serious matters. Often these student inquiries are disturbing to the school administration and to the community. I like the expression of the role of the press as one "to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable." There are still controversies over earthy language. Parents and patrons object to students using the kind of language they use. A caution to

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students is that they should not let a fuss over language obscure the more important points they are trying to make in their writing. Let the fuss be over the issues, not over the language.

Seventh, we have not solved the riddle of who is the publisher of a student newspaper, nor have we defined clearly for all situations the role of the adviser. Student newspapers are queer animals. They play games like they have all the rights of any press, which they usually do. However, they rarely run the risks that a true publisher does. Without this element, you cannot draw a true parallel with the professional press. There have been some moves, mostly in the collegiate press, to make the student press become "independent." This is good and should increase. Since students are only temporary leaders of their publications, there has to be some continuing factor in management. In high school, it is the adviser. In college, it is becoming more and more a general manager who is often an employee of the student-run paper. The less the school administration has to do with the process the better.

Finally, don't take yourself too seriously. This applies to editors and publishers of the professional press, to student editors and advisers, to principals and college presidents, and to reporters who cover important events. An illustration of what I mean appeared in Editor and Publisher. I saw it happen at a football game at the University of South Carolina. Editor and Publisher reported it this way:

> To one newsman, the presidential election campaign brought a moment of reflected glory.
>
> It came the day Roger Simon of the Chicago Sun-Times was selected to accompany President Ford to the 50-yard line at the Notre Dame-South Carolina football game. Explains Simon:
>
> "The President of the United States and I walked across the Astroturf together. Fifty-six thousand, seven hundred and twenty-one people stood up to cheer.

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"The President stopped. I stopped. He waved. I waved. He raised both hands above his head. I raised both arms above my head."

And then one of the President's aides touched Simon's arm and whispered: "It is our belief that the crowd is here primarily for the President," he said.

You might appreciate this cartoon from the University of Florida Orange Peel. It showed the members of the Board of Publications seated around the conference table. The members were obviously enjoying the contents of the latest issue of the ill-fated humor magazine. The squib coming from the mouth of one board member I will never forget. It was, "Let me read it one more time before we ban it."

I have known a lot of student editors. They have been a great group. Some of my happiest memories are associated with them. I hope that I can retain a sense of humor and also trust that I will always remember that "the crowd is not here primarily for me."

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August 14, 1978